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Victor Pasmore

Selected Works 1926-1954

The Arts Council 1955

Introduction

Victor Pasmore was born at Chelsham, Surrey in 1908. He was educated at Harrow and on leaving school was obliged, by the recent death of his father, to obtain immediate employment, taking a post as a clerk to the London County Council. During his years at Harrow his already marked aptitude for painting and drawing was developed by the sympathetic guidance of his art masters under whose tutelage Pasmore was encouraged to study the Impressionists. With what result is seen
1 in the present exhibition in the *Landscape with*
2 *Church* and *Cows*, both painted in his last year at Harrow. That Pasmore also received at this time a more academic grounding in the art of drawing as exemplified by the old masters, is
36 shown in the drawings of a *Palm Tree* and of
37 *St. Pauls* done soon after he first came to London. These four early works, dissimilar, if complementary, in style proclaim unmistakeably the natural gifts of a born painter and suggest in their author a precise visual apprehension content to be unemphatically expressed.

Pasmore's local government clerkship was to last until 1937, but his most active pre-occupation throughout his years at County Hall was with painting, in pursuit of which he began, in about 1928, to attend classes at the Central School as an evening student. Here his teacher was A. H. Hartrick, a painter personally acquainted to an extent unusual in English artists with the Impressionists and early post-Impressionists working in Paris at the turn of the century. From Hartrick Pasmore received encouragement and guidance in extending his acquaintance with a wider, if predominantly French, range of painting and through him he came under the influence of Whistler, Conder and of Japanese prints. He was in short searching for a style: in spite of his unselfconscious claim to have 'tried my hand at everyone', he was searching knowingly and drawing only on those painters whose emotional range is similar to his own. Thus, the acceptance of

Chardin, whose influence is very apparent in
3 *The Bradman Still Life*, was in the first place the result of a temperamental compatibility, although, incidentally, Chardin's influence in helping to concentrate Pasmore's powers of visual analysis and exploration acted as a valuable counter-acting discipline to the decorative charms of Conder and Whistler. However, it may well have been the influence of the Japanese print that enabled Pasmore to accept the primitivism of modern art and his first essays in this sphere were of a Sunday-painter manner. But it was not until he was elected to the London Artists Association in 1931 that he was able to penetrate more deeply into the implications of post-Impressionism. This was brought about by his friendship with two other members of the Association, William Coldstream and Claude Rogers. Coldstream was the leader of a group of young artists who were all working in a more or less Fauvist manner which was tending to develop into pure abstraction. In this atmosphere Pasmore was able to experiment in various manners oscillating between Fauvism and synthetic cubism. Significantly, for Pasmore is a painter with no talent for violence, there is no evidence of direct influence by Picasso.

This eclectic borrowing of styles did not prevent Pasmore from expressing his own particular sensibility in his painting; but the adoption of others' manners, evolved to express their individualities, would tend inevitably to bring about in a painter so seriously involved in his art an unsatisfactory relationship between vision and expression. This, it is clear, Pasmore himself felt and after 1933 he experienced a progressive dissatisfaction with the intense subjectivity and incompleteness of the style of painting which he had adopted. It may appear paradoxical, but in reality it is more an indication of seriousness that the group of young painters who in 1933 proclaimed their aesthetic at Zwemmer's under the programmatic, if confusing title of Objective Abstractionists, should have included beside Pasmore, Coldstream, Rogers, Graham Bell, Tibble and Moynihan, all of whom were, to a greater or lesser extent, to be involved in the years immediately following in the movement away from abstractionism.

For Pasmore, of necessity a Sunday painter, the process of intellectual experiment in his painting was perhaps longer protracted than it would otherwise have been; but the more thoroughly he understood painting, the more he knew of its history, the less convinced he became that he had understood and certainly that he had experienced, the reasons for and meaning of the fundamental change of style that took place in Paris during the first decade of the century. This basic disquiet was not calmed by awareness of the recent and current activities of the School of Paris, which had in the middle 'thirties attained as a result of the necessary iconoclasm of the previous decade to its most wildly extravagant and least disciplined phase. It is characteristic of Pasmore's complete integrity and of his disregard of fashion that he should have refused to subscribe, at a time when virtually all but the most hidebound were anxious to be 'in the movement', to ideas whose logic he did not understand. His resolution was strengthened by his friendship with Coldstream, Rogers and Graham Bell who had become similarly dissatisfied, though possibly for different reasons, with the current trend in painting. It was Pasmore, released at last from County Hall, together with these three painters who, encouraged and assisted by Sir Kenneth Clark, in the winter of 1937-8 opened a school for painting and drawing with studios in the Euston Road. The school, soon to be known, though unofficially, as The Euston Road School propounded no rigid aesthetic but taught the virtues and demonstrated the still existing possibility of a direct unprejudiced approach in painting to the objective world. On the positive side, therefore, the Euston Road School emerged as an anti-romantic movement - a fact which was to have bearing on Pasmore's subsequent abstract development.

The origins of the School and the reasons for its success are intricately woven into the social political and aesthetic history of the nineteen-thirties, forces to which, inevitably, Pasmore himself was subject. But for him the Euston Road period was essentially a time more of personal than public significance. He was, at the age of thirty, for the first time free to devote all his

energies to study and practice of his art, painting, in the words of one of his pupils, 'as apples grow on a tree' in a style based on Impressionism and inhibited by no doctrine either aesthetic or political. As a result Pasmore's painting at this time takes on unequivocally his own individual
9, 8 accent and though the influence of Degas, Sickert and Bonnard is evident, the fresh colours which avoid mere decorativeness by operating functionally to create volume and to relate the forms, the natural organic rhythms of the painting, the visual conviction emphasised by understatement and above all the sense of the pleasure taken both in the painting and its subject, belong unmistakably and completely to the painter.

The outbreak of war in 1939 led to the closing of the Euston Road School but among the disruption of the variegated experience of war-time Pasmore continued to paint assidiously, occupy-
11 ing himself particularly with figure studies, interiors and flower pieces, carefully composed for all their appearance of casualness and thinly brushed in in light tones which without recourse to line and contour create the form. The evanescent quality of Pasmore's painting of 1940-2 gave place
12, 13 during the later years of the war to a richer palette and an increased preoccupation with modelling, the paint being applied less sketchily and in broader, more clearly differentiated tonal areas more dominantly composed. This phase of research, with especial concern for spacial effect, is continued in the works painted between 1944 and 1947: the series of river scenes done at Hammersmith under snow, in mist and in half light and the landscapes painted at Blackheath and Cambridge, deliberately retrace the development of French painting from the direct vision
15 of a Whistler-like Impressionism to the formal intellectual analysis of Cezanne and Seurat.
Progressively in this series of paintings the appearance of the scene is subjected to an in-
18 creasingly intense process of visual selection and abstraction until, in the latest works the receding planes of distance are abstracted to one monochromatic plane of infinite recession and the foreground trees and bushes are reduced to rhythmically curvilinear traceries and precisely

related masses of pure colour, pointillistically applied.

In *The Park*, now in Brisbane, painted in 1947, Pasmore for the first time found that he could transform, logically and organically, these natural forms of appearance into new forms of his own invention. From this time onwards his approach to his art was to undergo a fundamental change: natural or descriptive representation gives place to a form of painting which, enanating from the artist's emotions and sensations and controlled by the operation of his intellect and sensibility, refers more to itself than to external nature. The adoption of this approach produced during the years 1948-50 works both in oil and collage which are composed on a series
23 of selected geometrical forms, the rectangle,
25, 28 the triangle, the circle, and the spiral - concrete symbols which exist in their own right and which lend themselves to free interpretation by the painter. At the same time, as these elements are everywhere present in nature, their employment allows of the creation in purely formal terms of effects analogous to those naturally perceived.

Thus, whereas the formal geometry of Hokusai's *Wave* or Leonardo's studies of waves results from a process of visual abstraction before na-
24 ture, Pasmore's *The Wave* arrives at an image parallel to that observable in nature and evokes emotions similar to those associated with the spiral movements of nature, by beginning from a purely formal abstraction.

It is characteristic of Pasmore that his arrival at this phase of his development should have been reached by a conscious process of historical study. We have already seen how in the mid-thirties he had deliberately returned from Objective Abstractionism, by which was meant abstractionism based on objective appearance, to the study of Impressionism and how, from 1944-7 his art deliberately explores the implications of the phase of French painting from Cezanne to Seurat. But it was from his reading in the writings of Cezanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, Pissaro and Gau-

guin, reinforced by the impact of the 1945 Picasso exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, that Pasmore now perceived the logical necessity for the adoption of an abstract approach. Van Gogh's postulate of 'an art of the future, closer to music, where colour would reign supreme', his statement that 'To start from one's palette, from one's knowledge of the harmony of colours, is quite different from following nature mechanically' and Cezanne's formulation of the painter's working, 'The painter objectifies his sensibility, he makes a concrete object and gives it individuality. He creates numerous relations, developing them according to a new and original logic', all helped to convince Pasmore of the inevitability of art entering a phase in which it should mirror nature, not superficially, but organically and in its manner of operation, '(shining) upon the spectator like the sun and (warming) his heart by the power of its own form'.

It is possible that the apparently ambivalent natural relationship of paintings such as *The Snowstorm* (Arts Council Collection), *The Shore*
24 *of the Inland Sea* (Tate Gallery) and *The Wave* of 1949-50, seemed to Pasmore insufficiently to carry through the logical implications of the new aesthetic. Be that as it may, his work of 1950-51 shows an increasing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the two dimensional rectangular
29 canvas. A number of paintings oval in shape were
27 produced about this time and the mural for Kingston bus garage canteen began as a painting but developed into a relief. A further experience of working in an architectural setting at the South Bank Exhibition 1951, helped to confirm Pasmore's conviction that the basic two-dimensional plane of painting was insufficient to assert the identity of the picture as an object. He had thus arrived at the same aesthetic dilemma as that which Cubism produced. But whereas the abandonment of the two-dimensional limitation was attempted synthetically by the Cubists, with laws as artificial as those of perspective and only at the cost of creating a conflicting relationship between the subject represented and the object created, Pasmore was able, with his knowledge of the work

of Mondriaan, Arp, Klee, Moore, Miro, Nicholson and the Constructivists, to accept the logical necessity of creating in purely formal terms an objective reality which, by its finite, three-dimensional existence in space creates its own
31, 35 environment in which to express its own nature; a nature which has nothing whatever to do with illusion or representation but which exists as a logical, self-sufficient reality, a function of the artist's intellect and emotions. For Pasmore however, this does not mean a complete abandonment of the objective aspirations of the Euston Road School, but a reassessment of objective factors in the light of new ideas. Thus, knowledge of mathematics and processes of natural structure have, for him, taken the place of abstraction on the level of direct appearance.

The formulation of such an aesthetic does not necessarily imply the invalidation of figurative painting: rather it is the rationalisation of the artist's need to express in new terms unemcumbered by the associations of pictorial tradition a vision conditioned by current scientific concepts of space and matter. In this need, Pasmore has not hesitated to utilise the materials and skills of contemporary technology and indeed it is undoubtedly due in part to the availability of that technology (on which, significantly, the architect is continually drawing) that his art has developed both in style and content in its present form. Pasmore himself regards his recent work in the new media as attempts to establish a working relationship between the identity and nature of artistic creation and the processes of an age in which science and technology have assumed a social dominance which threatens the possibility of the individual's personal development.

It is hoped that this exhibition will give an opportunity for those who see it to follow the development of one of the most interesting of our contemporaries. It is possible too that the exhibition may provide, in presenting the work of a painter whose great natural gift has been developed and at each stage controlled by an intellectual understanding of his relation to the historic

process in painting, a commentary of peculiar significance in the development of modern painting. What at least is certain is that the exhibition will afford satisfaction to those who can delight in the working of a precise sensibility stating conclusions logically arrived at in a manner which it is pleasurable to behold.

John Commander

The Arts Council of Great Britain wishes to record its gratitude to those lenders, both public and private, who have so readily agreed to the loan of paintings for this exhibition.

The exhibition has been got together in consultation with the artist whose help, advice and patience in answering questions are much appreciated.

Catalogue

Measurements are given in inches: width precedes height. Works not attributed to owners are for sale. Prices may be had on application.

1 Landscape with Church
Oil: 17 x 12¼
1926

2 Cows
Oil: 18 x 14
1926
Mrs. Vera Wilson

3 Bradman Still Life
Oil: 21 x 17
1929
Leeds City Art Gallery

4 Seafront
Oil: 27 x 20
1932
Lynton Lamb Esq.

5 View through a Window
Oil:
1932
The Redfern Gallery

6 Portrait of Claude Rogers
Oil: 20 x 24
1933
Claude Rogers Esq.

7 Landscape
Oil: 18 x 12
1934
St. George's Gallery

8 Wine Bottles
Oil: 24 x 18
1936
Eardley Knollys Esq.

9 Girl with a Handbag
Oil: 20 x 30
1938
Leeds City Art Gallery

10 Landscape
Oil on panel: 10½ x 8½
1940
William Coldstream Esq.

11 Pink Rose
Oil: 6 x 8
1940
Mrs. Victor Pasmore

12 Chrysanthemums
Oil: 18 x 24
1943
Mrs. Hamish Hamilton

13 Head of a Girl
Oil: 18 x 24
1944
Adrian Heath Esq.

14 Antique
Oil: 11½ x 19
1944-5
Claude Rogers Esq.

15 Snow Scene
Oil: 24 x 18
1944
Ashmolean Museum: Oxford

16 The Evening Star
Oil: 40 x 30
1945
Sir Kenneth Clark

17 The Studio of Ingres
Oil: 40 x 30
1945-6
Sir Kenneth Clark

18 The Hanging Gardens of Hammersmith
Oil: 40 x 30
1946-7
Miss Pamela Harris

19 Garden in Spring
Oil: 24 x 20
1947
Marchioness of Normanby

20 View from Magdalene Bridge: Cambridge
Oil: 27 x 22
1947
Kenneth Harrison Esq.

21 View from Magdalene Bridge: Cambridge
Oil: 32 x 23
1947
Kenneth Harrison Esq.

22 Indian Man
Oil: 16 x 20
1949
Gimpel Fils

23 Rectangular Motif in Yellow and Grey
Oil and Collage: 16 x 20
1949
John Piper Esq.

24 The Wave
Oil: 42 x 30
1949-50

25 Square Motif in Brown, White, Blue and Ochre
Oil and Collage: 30 x 25
1949-53

26 Motif in Grey and Ochre
Oil: 16 x 20
1950

27 Plaster Relief
Egg tempera on plaster: 23 x 10
1950

28 Spiral Motif
Oil: 8¾ x 24
1950-2

29 Oval Motif in White, Brown, Maroon and Pink
Oil: 28¾ x 18¾
1951

30 Rectangular Motif in Blue, Brown and Lilac
Collage: 14⅝ x 18
1951
Mrs. Victor Pasmore

31 Relief in White, Black, Red and Yellow
Plywood and oil: 18 x 40⅞
1951-3

32 Rectangular Motif in Black and White
Photostat and collage: 18 x 23
1953

33 Motif in Red and Black
Photostat and collage: 20 x 21
1953

34 Motif in Blue and Brown
Collage: 40 x 30
1954

35 Relief Painting in White, Black and Indian Red
Plywood and oil: 24 x 27
1954

drawings

36 Palm Tree
Pencil: 10 x 13
1927
Mrs. Gerald Yorke

37 St. Paul's
Pencil: 7¾ x 10¾
1927

38 Reclining figure
Pencil: 8 x 6
1942
Michael Ayrton Esq.

39 The Antique Room
Pencil: 13¾ x 9¾
1944

40 * Dead Tree
Pen and ink: 10 x 7½
1946

41 The Hanging Gardens of Hammersmith
(a) Scheme for the composition
Pencil: 7 x 5¾
1946

(b) Trees
Pencil: 4¾ x 6¾
1946

42 Two Vases
Pencil: 15 x 11
1950

43 Interior with View of St. Ives Harbour
Pen and ink: 11 x 8½
1950

44 St. Ives Harbour
Pen and ink: 8 x 9½
1950

45 Sea and Rocks
Pen and ink: 10¾ x 9½
1950

46 Linear Motif
Pen and ink: 12 x 10
1950

47 Linear Motif
Line-cut: 12 x 12
1951

48 Linear Motif
Lithograph: 17½ x 22½
1950

49 The Artist's Son
Pen and ink: 6½ x 10
1951
Mrs. Victor Pasmore

50 Black Forms
Pen and ink: 9 x 12½
1953

51 Abstract Composition
Pencil: 8 x 11
1954

52 Abstract Composition
Pencil: 8 x 11
1954

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